

**The Authority of the Word**  
**John 5:1 – 17**  
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church  
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I once found an advertisement offering ‘Holy Water from Lourdes, France.’ Lourdes is famous as a place of miraculous healing. For \$39.95 you get a bottle, in the shape of the Virgin Mary, filled with water from the ‘Holy Spring,’ together with a medallion and a pocket prayer. It is preferable, of course, for those who are able, to travel to Lourdes itself. Pilgrims to Lourdes seek to bathe in the water of the spring. The basilica adjacent to the spring, has constructed changing rooms to facilitate the switch from street clothes to bathing suits. I am told that there are three entrances to the changing rooms. They are labeled: ‘Men,’ ‘Women’ and ‘Clergy.’ I have wondered which Lois Ann would choose if we were ever to find ourselves there. ☺

**Setting – Why this man? In this way? On this day?**

<sup>2</sup> Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. <sup>3</sup> In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed.

Visit the city of Jerusalem today and you can find the excavated ruins of the Pools of Bethesda. They are located just inside the Lion’s Gate – the name has been changed since the first century when it was known as the Sheep Gate. The Pools of Bethesda were not like modern community beach clubs or swimming pools where people gather for recreation, exercise and barbeque. Jesus’ visit to the Pools of Bethesda was not akin to a trip to Club Med but rather more like a trip to the local hospital. The Lord Christ is not found in resorts, but in the places of greatest need. These pools had more of a medicinal atmosphere about them. Bethesda means ‘house of mercy.’ The people gathered about the pools of Bethesda were men and women seeking healing from disease and frailty.

If this was the Mayo Clinic of ancient Jerusalem, a place filled with people possessed of great need, then the first question we must ask is this: *why did Jesus heal only this man out of all the needful men and women present this day?*

There are several levels by which we can answer this question. Each is complementary and reinforces each other. The first we can identify is this: to show the authority of Christ’s word.

**To Show the Authority of Christ’s Word**

<sup>5</sup> One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. <sup>6</sup> When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be healed?”

<sup>8</sup> Jesus said to him, “Get up, take up your bed, and walk.”

The first thing to note is what Jesus does not command. These pools had gained a reputation as a place of miracles. As the man tells Jesus, when the angel of the Lord would trouble the water, something which would happen at unpredictable times and seasons, the first person into the water would find the healing he sought. Many had gathered expectantly upon the apron surrounding the pools in hope that they would be the first to notice, the first to dive in, to be the one to be healed.

Jesus does not tell the man to get into the water. Jesus is the Lord of the angels of heaven. He does not need the miracle of the water to bring healing to this man. Jesus Christ's word is sufficient. It is enough. It is the power of his word that stands behind the healing power of the Bethesda pools. For this reason, the command given is 'rise and walk,' not 'rise and enter the water.' Christ is himself the source. There is no appeal to another.

It is for this reason that we should beware of such things as the \$39.95 bottle of holy water from Lourdes, France. God, in his sovereign mystery, may choose to give miraculous healings associated with particular times and places. Lourdes may be a Pool of Bethesda for the modern world. But the modern world has been blessed with the knowledge and name of Jesus Christ. The focus should be upon the authority of Jesus Christ and his word. The water may make a difference in the quality of Perrier or Coors, but in itself it means nothing in regards to the healing God may give. The healing power is in Christ, and him alone.

The first reason Jesus heals this man in this way is to show the **authority** of his word. The second reason is to establish the **power** of his word.

### **To Show the Power of Christ's Word**

<sup>7</sup> The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me."

<sup>9</sup> And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked.

John chapter 4 tells the story of the healing of the nobleman's son. One facet of that healing was the power of Jesus' word: he speaks and the boy is healed, fifteen miles away. This was a healing by Christ's word across the distance of space. The nobleman, the boy's father, must trust Christ's word and believe as he begins his journey back to his home to hear the report of his son's health. The healing told in John 5 reflects the power of Christ's word to heal across time. This man's infirmity had been upon him for thirty-eight years. His bones would have shriveled and his muscles would have atrophied. He lay beside the pool but could barely move. It was for this reason, he tells Jesus, that when the waters stirred, he was always beaten in the race to get wet.

When Jesus speaks this word of healing, his command to the man is to 'Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.' The one who could barely move now carries his bed. It is a perfect contrast. The bed had carried him for thirty-eight years. Now he carries it. There is no period of rehabilitation in this healing. Christ speaks and he is

healed: the disease is gone, the body is strong. The man is able to rise and walk. Only the power of God is capable of performing a miracle such as this. No doubt Jesus chose this man, out of all the others, to make it clear that no other explanation would suffice. It is the power of God, the power of his word, alone, that has wrought this miracle.

The man is healed to show the authority of Christ's word. He is healed to reveal the power of his word. Thirdly, he is healed to declare the arrival of Christ's word.

### **To Show the Arrival of Christ's Word**

<sup>9</sup> And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked. Now that day was the Sabbath.

The key element of this insight arises from the day of the week Jesus chooses to perform this miracle. Note that Jesus initiates this miracle. He asks the man, 'Do you want to be healed?' Not surprisingly, the man earnestly desires health and wholeness. Jesus issues his word of command and the man is healed. He takes up his bed and walks.

All this takes on added significance, and intrigue, when we note that Jesus initiates this encounter with the lame man on the Sabbath. This is significant because the Jewish rabbis made clear that no work was to be done on the Sabbath day. Over the centuries the rabbis debated and refined in great deal the definition of work. Visit modern Israel today you will see the Sabbath observed. Your hotel will not offer you a hot breakfast on the Sabbath, for cooking is considered work. Your hotel will have a Sabbath elevator: one programmed to run continually and to stop on every floor, permitting guests to enter and leave the elevators without pressing a button. Pressing a button is considered 'work.' El AL, the Israeli airlines, owns a special fleet of unmarked aircraft they fly on the Sabbath, so as not to offend the sensitivities of the orthodox.

It was a well established principle of Sabbath observance in Jesus day that a person should not carry a load, for carrying a load was work and work was prohibited on the Sabbath. Yet Jesus' command to the lame man includes the instruction that he is not simply to leave his bed behind at the pool of Bethesda but that he is to carry it. Jesus' word of healing includes a clear command to disobey the religious law of his day. Why would he do this?

There are, I think, two reasons. The first has to do with publicity, advertisement, and symbolism. Most communities in the modern world do not observe the Sabbath. For this reason, we do not immediately recognize the implications of Jesus instruction to the man that day to "take up your bed, and walk."

One of my favorite towns on the New Jersey seaboard is Ocean Grove. Ocean Grove grew out of the Methodist camp meetings of the 1800's. When I was a teenager the town prohibited the driving of cars on its streets on Sundays. There

was only one entrance to the town. On Sundays they would place a gate across it. No stores or restaurants were open on Sunday. The next town north of Ocean Grove was Asbury Park. Asbury Park was an amusement town full of arcades, rides, and miniature golf courses. It ran 24 / 7. Driving a car in Asbury Park on a Sunday was not something which would have been noticed. But driving a car in Ocean Grove on a Sunday would have caught people's attention. All of the pizza places in Asbury Park were open on Sunday – so what? But if a pizza place in Ocean Grove opened up on a Sunday, the town would have talked.

When Jesus tells this man to “take up your bed, and walk” on the Sabbath, he is creating publicity. Like a man wearing a sandwich board advertisement down the streets of New York, wherever this man goes, people are going to notice. They will wonder what is going on and ask *‘why is this man so blatantly breaking the Sabbath rules and regulations?’*

Which, of course, leads to the second reason why Jesus issues this command to the lame man: to show that Jesus Christ is the Lord of the Sabbath.

### **To Show that Christ is Lord of the Sabbath**

“The man who healed me, that man said to me, ‘Take up your bed, and walk.’ ”

John's gospel calls the miracles of Jesus ‘signs.’ What he means is that each has significance and meaning deeper and greater than the miracle itself. Each points to something beyond itself. In this case, the sign of this miracle points to Jesus' authority as the Lord of the Sabbath. Just as his word possesses the authority to overrule the law of nature and bring instant healing to this man who has been lame for thirty-eight years, so too his word has the authority to overrule the regulations of Sabbath observance and law. His word takes precedence.

Saying that Jesus Christ has authority over the Sabbath regulations, over the Law, is not to suggest an antinomianism that says that Christ's coming sweeps away God's law and erases the moral obligations of humanity. No. Jesus Christ's word of command to the man overrules the natural decay and corruption of his body, bringing instantaneous healing, but it does not overrule the natural order. The sun still rises and sets as it always has. Healing, for the most part, is still the domain of doctors and health community. But in Christ's word we see that he is sovereign over nature. So too, in his command to the man to carry his mat on the Sabbath, the obligation of Sabbath observance, as well as all the moral laws of God, remains in force. But Christ is sovereign over the Law as well.

This is an important, but difficult, point to make in our modern world. In our modern world we have exalted the concept of choice and the value of freedom to such a point that they have become idolatrous. Sabbath is an alien concept. Our world runs 24 / 7, and we grow offended when anyone suggests that it should be otherwise. The town of Ocean Grove, NJ is no longer distinct and different from Asbury Park: over the years secular individuals have successfully used litigation to

force it to look and act like every other town on the Jersey Shore: the barricade is gone, the shops are open on Sundays. Is that an improvement?

The Lord Christ's point in telling this man to carry his mat on the Sabbath is to highlight the difference between those who understand the true value of the Sabbath and those who do not. Those who know the value of the Sabbath know that it was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. We rejoice that this man is given the rare privilege of breaking the Sabbath because today the bonds that have held him for thirty-eight years have been broken. The good news of his healing trumps the rules and regulations of the day. Several years ago, you may recall how I spoke positively of Whitney Denman and her boys missing worship one Sunday morning to attend an Eagle's game. Whitney had ALS and she and her boys were given goal line tickets courtesy of the ALS association. This was the first, and still the only time, I have given my blessing to choosing a sporting event over Sunday morning worship – the most important hour of your week. There is a place for rules; they are important: but the rules serve the human community, not vice versa.

Like I said, this is a difficult point to make in our modern world. Everything I have just said is true, yet at the same time we must remember that we can as easily go wrong in the other direction, when we demand release from the rules and regulations and demands of life because we find them inconvenient, annoying or challenging. We think that the rules are there as a hindrance, forgetting that God has woven his law into the fabric of our universe for our benefit and our protection. The dispensation given to this man to 'break' the Sabbath is a rare thing; not a precedent for us to break God's laws as we choose.

Why this man, in this way and at this time? This healing establishes the authority of the Word of Christ; the power of the word of Christ and declares the arrival of the word of Christ into our world. It establishes Jesus' authority over the Law. Finally, this word is given to the man to test the faith of the one who is healed.

### **To Test the Faith of the one who is Healed**

<sup>10</sup> So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed."

Jesus' instructions to this man result in his being judged negatively for his actions. Christ's instructions provoke his public censure. He hears our Lord's words and obeys, and the result is a degree of public disapproval and humiliation.

We must beware of adopting a Pollyanna attitude regarding the results of a person's encounter with Jesus Christ. It is not always all sweetness and light. I am sure this man was probably quite astonished to be questioned and challenged in this way. Can you imagine the emotion that must have flowed through this man after a life of thirty-eight years as an invalid and then a miraculous release and healing? He was not just carrying his pallet, he was probably dancing. If I were him I'd have been doing the Funky-Chicken out the Sheep's Gate and on my way to

Jericho. And then, in the midst of his delight and gratitude, he discovers that there are those who disapprove of him, because he is carrying a burden on the Sabbath which he ought not to be carrying. The man, no doubt, would have been incredulous. "I have carried a burden for thirty-eight years which I ought not to have carried," he would say, "and you are going to object now because I carry this rolled up mat?"

The man, caught up in his delight and gratitude, would undoubtedly have been shocked to realize that he was now the object of scorn and judgment. Can you imagine the disappointment he must have felt at that moment?

The Lord Christ sometimes leads us into situations where we are tested. We see God's hand. We are delighted by what we perceive God is doing. But others do not see it. They may even misunderstand us, judge us, or reject us. The thing to be learned in such contexts is this: those healed by Christ's word must also be ruled by his word. We bear the scorn, accept the judgment.

### **Close**

<sup>14</sup> Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you."

The story of this man's healing shows us the authority of the word of Christ. It unveils the power of the word of Christ. It declares the arrival of God's word into our midst. It establishes Jesus' authority as Lord of the Sabbath. And, it shows the lame man that those who are healed by the word of Christ must also be ruled by the word of Christ.

There is one final sense in which we ought to understand this healing. Why did Jesus chose to heal this man, in this way, and at this time? In part it is because this man's healing is a metaphor of what Christ does in the lives of sinners. Like the lame man by the side of the pool, we are unable to help ourselves. We are lame and withered. Whatever we may attempt or try in order to improve ourselves, nothing ever comes of it – until Christ notices us. This miracle is a metaphor of what Christ does spiritually in the lives of his people. The conversion of the sinner is the healing of a chronic disease.

The story ends when Jesus finds the man in the Temple. It is easy to gloss over this detail and miss its significance. This man had been unable to go to the temple for years, for thirty-eight years. His heart and attitude were in the right place. He understood the importance of gratitude. He is in the Temple to offer praise and sacrifice to God for the healing he has experienced. Jesus finds the man in exactly the place where he should have been found: worshipping God for the blessings he has received. Too many receive the blessings of Christ, but fail to show appropriate gratitude to Christ. This man is a model for us. When we experience God's blessing in our lives, our first response ought to be to show our gratitude and thankfulness to God.

Say 'Amen' Somebody

**5** After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

<sup>2</sup> Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. <sup>3</sup> In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. <sup>5</sup> One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. <sup>6</sup> When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be healed?” <sup>7</sup> The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.” <sup>8</sup> Jesus said to him, “Get up, take up your bed, and walk.” <sup>9</sup> And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked.

Now that day was the Sabbath. <sup>10</sup> So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed.” <sup>11</sup> But he answered them, “The man who healed me, that man said to me, ‘Take up your bed, and walk.’ ” <sup>12</sup> They asked him, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take up your bed and walk’?” <sup>13</sup> Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place. <sup>14</sup> Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, “See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.” <sup>15</sup> The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. <sup>16</sup> And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. <sup>17</sup> But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.”